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THE ABILITY OF THE STATE TO PREVENT AN
EPIDEMIC OF CHOLERA.

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SECRETARY OF THE STATE BOARD OF HEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA.

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**THE ABILITY OF THE STATE TO PREVENT AN
EPIDEMIC OF CHOLERA.¹**

BY BENJAMIN LEE, M.D.,
SECRETARY OF THE STATE BOARD OF HEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA.

THERE are two ways of preventing an epidemic of Asiatic cholera: the one, by a perfect system of quarantine to prevent a single germ of the disease from entering the country to be protected; the other, by the enforcement of enlightened and strict sanitary regulations to remove all conditions favorable for the propagation of the germ should it enter. This latter is the English way.

The system of seacoast quarantine in Great Britain, as has long been known to American sanitarians, is defective in the extreme. Recent disclosures have developed the fact that there is really no power in the Government to enforce quarantine. The great British doctrine of free trade seems to have been pushed to its utmost limit to include disease as well as other commodities. This system may prove successful. It may be possible to introduce the germs into a community and to have everything in such an admirable condition of cleanliness and such strict enforcement of local precautions that the

¹ Read before the Philadelphia County Medical Society, September 14, 1892.



germs will quickly die. This seems to have taken place in England during the past fortnight. But to accomplish this result there must be a complete and thorough sanitary organization of the country, so that no foot of ground escapes frequent sanitary inspection and no accumulations of filth are allowed to remain upon its surface or beneath the surface for an hour.

In England, every householder is liable at any moment to a visit from an agent of the Board of Health. If this agent finds the least infraction of the rules of the Board, so much as a piece of bone lying on the ground which should be in the garbage receptacle, he whips out his tablet and makes a note of the fact and says, "You are fined so many shillings." The fine is paid on the spot. Such is the sanitary organization of England, with the Local Government Board at its head, controlling the whole system. Such, unfortunately, is not the sanitary organization of all of the States of this Union. Hence it would be folly for us not to make every effort to render the first plan successful. Evidently neither should be relied on alone. The one should supplement the other.

The subject assigned to me by your Directors may be considered from two points of view: the ideal and the actual—the ideal based upon conditions which are entirely practicable and possible; the actual based upon conditions now existing in this State.

The ideal conditions for defence against cholera are:

First. Thorough sanitary organization of the

State, no portion of its territory to be without its legally qualified health-officer, having a district not too large for faithful and frequent personal inspection ; such officer to be well paid for his services, and to be subordinate to a county or district health-officer, also properly remunerated, and all to be controlled by the central health-authority of the State.

Second. A sanitary code at least as perfect and strict as that of a large city—Philadelphia, for example—for the entire State.

Third. A national quarantine service, with ample powers and means, having a station at the mouth of every large bay or river on which are ports of entry, as remote as possible from centers of population, with occasional refuges, remote from channels of commerce, to which ships and effects demanding an unusual amount of disinfection can be remanded if necessary.

On this question of the importance of a uniform and comprehensive system of coast-defence under national *régime* I feel very strongly.

I may be pardoned for alluding to a paper which I read before the National Conference of State Boards of Health in 1888, in which I answered affirmatively the question, "Should the National Government Assume Control of Quarantine at All Ports of Entry?," to a paper which I read before the Section on State Medicine of the American Medical Association, in the same year, entitled, "Should Not the National Government Defend Our Ports against the National Enemy, Contagious Disease?" and to a "Report of Inspections of the

Quarantine Stations of the Middle Atlantic Coast," made to the National Conference of State Boards of Health, at the close of which I suggested the following evils as incident to the disjointed system of State and municipal quarantines:

"*First.* Want of uniformity in quarantine regulations.

"*Second.* Conflict of authority, owing to the methods of appointing officials.

"*Third.* The entire lack of appreciation on the part of local Legislatures, whether State or municipal, of the importance of the expenditure of considerable amounts of money in order to render quarantines at once efficient and inoppressive.

"*Fourth.* The tendency on the part of local civic authorities to limit their responsibility to the protection of their own city."

The fourth condition which I would propose is: A municipal quarantine service for all large cities, by which vessels can be subjected to a second scrutiny whenever circumstances render it necessary.

I have no hesitation in saying that, with the foregoing conditions, in view of our present accurate knowledge of the habits and habitat of the cholera-bacillus and its mode of propagation, for which thanks are due, among others, to our distinguished fellow-member, Dr. Shakespeare, the ability of the State to prevent an epidemic of cholera is absolute.

Now let us come to actual conditions, which are what more nearly concern us at the present moment: What as to the ability of this particular State

of Pennsylvania to exclude the disease or to prevent its becoming epidemic?

I placed as first among the essentials of immunity, sanitary organization of the State and a State sanitary code, because I believe them to be the most important. In these grand fundamental requirements of an enlightened civilization I regret to be compelled to say that Pennsylvania is absolutely deficient. Notwithstanding the repeated importunities of the Board of Health, the Legislature persistently declines to legalize boards of health or health-authorities of any kind outside of large cities. The only appeal that our people living in towns, villages, and rural districts have when their neighborhood is invaded by epidemic disease, or when suffering from some intolerable nuisance that endangers the public health, is to the State Board of Health. It is not difficult to understand how utterly impossible it is for a single Board, with one paid officer, and four thousand dollars a year to work with, to give any adequate attention to the complaints of three million people scattered over an area of forty-five thousand square miles.

The constant cry that comes up to the ears of the Board is: "Our village is in a most filthy condition; our children are dying of diphtheria; typhoid fever is rife; and we are entirely without health-authorities of any kind. Will you not come and help us?"

In its efforts to render aid in such cases the Board finds itself at once hampered by the fact that the State is almost entirely without sanitary statutes. In order to enforce its orders it must have recourse

to the slow process of the law and trial by jury. In other words, the State of Pennsylvania is without a sanitary code.

These being the conditions, the ability of this State to prevent cholera from becoming epidemic, should its germs find their way into its densely populated and filthy mining towns, is more than doubtful. Once let it become epidemic along the course of the Schuylkill River, and Philadelphia may repeat the experience of Hamburg.

In the absence, then, of any proper provision for sanitary officers, the Governor of this State was eminently justified in urging the people to unite in voluntary organizations, and appoint sanitary committees for the purpose of putting their respective towns in a state of sanitary defence. This they are doing to an encouraging extent, but, of course, they labor under a great disadvantage from lack both of authority and of experience.

Regarding our third condition, the outlook is extremely encouraging. The United States Quarantine Station at the mouth of Delaware Bay is in many respects well equipped. Its deficiencies are being rapidly made good. Its officers are efficient and experienced. It is remote from any large center of population, and of sufficient extent to accommodate a large number of suspects. I have strong faith that the enemy will not pass this outer line of coast-defence. Should it do so, it will be met by the united forces of State and city at the Lazaretto, and, while the unfortunate contiguity of that station to this city and to the city of Chester and

a populous neighborhood must be admitted, yet the energy and decision with which the Board of Health of this city and the State Quarantine authorities connected with this port are meeting the emergency, and supplementing the altogether inadequate and antiquated plant at the Lazaretto with modern appliances and increased accommodations, afford reasonable ground for hope that the onward march of the disease will be finally checked at that point.

Our fourth condition, therefore, while by no means all that could be desired, still exists in such a state of preparation that we may place considerable reliance upon it.

As I understand the situation, then, our danger here in this city lies not so much in an open invasion by way of the Delaware River as in a covert movement by flank and rear, through other ports, or possibly through merchandise introduced at this port, aided by the coöperation of those powerful allies, filth and absence of sanitary law and organization.

To guard as far as possible against this indirect introduction of the disease through other ports, the State Board of Health has promulgated the following order:

"To Transportation Companies:

"In accordance with Regulation III of this Board, in regard to the sanitary supervision of travel and traffic, which reads as follows:

" "Upon satisfactory information of the approach to or transit through the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania of

infected persons or goods, it shall be the duty of the Secretary, as executive officer of the Board, to cause the same to be stopped at the State line, or, if found within the limits of the State, to cause such persons or goods to be removed from cars, stages, vessels, boats, or other conveyances, and securely isolated and disinfected; and he may, if in his judgment the emergency is such as to demand it, call a meeting of the Committee on Travel and Traffic, to which his action shall be submitted, with his reasons therefor, in writing. But, in cases coming under the jurisdiction of national or municipal quarantine authorities, he shall coöperate with said authorities in all such action'

"Notice is hereby given to the officers of all transportation companies, whether by land or by water, that any transportation company shall be declared contraband of quarantine which shall introduce, land, or transport within the borders of this Commonwealth of Pennsylvania any person suffering from Asiatic cholera or cholera (so-called), or any person who shall develop said disease within four full days after having been so introduced, transported, or landed within the borders of said Commonwealth by such company.

"If a railroad company be thus declared contraband of quarantine its trains shall be stopped at the State line, and held until inspected by an inspector of this Board and declared by him free from the danger of conveying the contagion of Asiatic cholera into this Commonwealth.

"If a steamboat, canal, or other navigation company, its boats shall not be allowed to enter any dock, tie up at any wharf, or by any means land passengers, baggage, or merchandise until it has undergone like inspection, and been declared free from danger of introducing the said contagion into the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

"By order of the Board,

"BENJAMIN LEE, M.D.,

"Secretary and Executive Officer."

As a further matter of precaution, the Board has issued the following instructions:

"To the Officers of Railroad and Steamboat Companies in Pennsylvania :

"The principal railroad companies operating in this State have adopted admirable regulations for the sanitary care of their cars and premises under ordinary conditions. The State Board of Health has already taken occasion to commend these, as well as the readiness of these companies to coöperate with it in efforts to protect the public health. In view, however, of the threatened invasion of Asiatic cholera, it is important to enforce these regulations with unusual strictness, and to take certain additional precautions.

"The Board therefore orders :

"*First.* That all water-closets and urinals in cars be provided with proper water-tight receptacles for retaining deposits, instead of allowing them to fall on the track, and thus endanger water-supplies ; said receptacles to contain disinfectants, and to be renewed at certain intervals in such places and in such manner as may be determined upon for the most perfect protection against infection. The adoption of the precaution should be begun with second-class and immigrant cars, and extended as rapidly as possible to first-class cars.

"*Second.* Should the discharges of the sick fall upon seats, floors, or platforms of cars or stations, they should be first disinfected, and then removed in closed buckets, and the soiled places then disinfected and thoroughly cleaned.

"*Third.* All cars coming from infected places shall be disinfected before sweeping, and the sweepings disinfected and burned.

"*Fourth.* All water-closets and urinals in steamboats and canal boats shall be provided with proper water-tight receptacles for retaining deposits instead of allowing them to fall into the water, which is in most instances the supply of drinking-water for some center of population. Such receptacles shall always contain disinfectants, and shall be emptied at the end of each trip in such manner and in such place as may be designated by the local authorities.

"*Fifth.* All accumulations of filthy clothing and rags shall be at once disinfected and burned.

"*Sixth.* Should cholera become epidemic, the drinking-water furnished for the use of passengers should be boiled, and, so far as possible, should not be obtained from places in which the disease exists.

"By order of the Board,

"BENJAMIN LEE, M.D.,

"Secretary and Executive Officer."

The campaign throughout the State and on the borders being thus outlined, we come to perhaps the most important question of all, where the ability of the State is concerned, viz., the sinews of war. Much work of the utmost importance should be done under the superintendence of the State Board of Health. But whence is the money to come to pay?

The laws make provision for the expenditure of the State's funds with the utmost lavishness for the protection of property; but, when nothing more valuable than human life is concerned, there is no authority for the disbursement of a single penny from the treasury beyond the meager appropriation to the State Board of Health already mentioned.

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